

Sig Langegger PhD

The closest distance between a human being and the truth is a story.
Anthony de Mello

Research Statement

I am a critical scholar working in applied and theoretical realms of urban planning as they intersect with everyday geographies. The two arcs of my research are the gentrification of public space and the criminalization of impoverished people, particularly those who are homeless. My focus on public space opens avenues to cross-disciplinary collaboration, most notably with those working in anthropology, political science, and sociology.

I do not view theories as reductive formulae, rather I allow research contexts and theoretical perspectives to mesh in the field. The goals of my research are: to gain insight into the role public space plays in urban change; to understand how and why differently situated people subvert formal and informal regulations of public space; and to deconstruct intended and unintended consequences of the by-laws and social sanctions governing human behavior on publicly accessible property. By foregrounding everyday experience, my ethnographic work is neither deductive nor inductive but abductive, centering on the modification of theory to better explain gaps in conceptual systems. In the field I use a rapid ethnographic approach to facilitate triangulation between archival research methods and ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and narrative interviews. Fusing these perspectives, I permit theory to frame my inquiry while the voices of my participants guide it.

Public space can be used as a lever of gentrification and must therefore be understood as an active mechanism of displacement. My dissertation explores manifold regimes of public space design and regulation in Denver, Colorado. Rooted in property rights theory and foregrounding small levers of urban governance, primarily nuisance law and the design and management of everyday public spaces, this vector of my research enlarges our understanding of the sociolegal drivers of urban change. I accessed multiple sources of archival data from neighborhood histories, assessor records, as well as the city's parks and recreation, excise and licensing, and planning departments. I relied on participant, unobtrusive, and mobile observation as well as in-depth narrative interviews of new and established residents, city planners and managers, community activists, and real estate professionals. Finally, I used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to analyze the data.

Several elements of this work are now published. "Viva La Raza: A park, a riot and neighborhood change in North Denver" (*Urban Studies*, 2013) shows how racial profiling and urban design interrelate to exclude Latinos from public space and facilitate gentrification. "Curbing Cruising: Lowriding and the domestication of Denver's Northside," a chapter in *Incomplete Streets* (2014), highlights how the policing and design of city streets function as levers of gentrification. "Emergent public space: Sustaining Chicano culture in North Denver" (*Cities*, 2013) explores how ethnic urban gardens can work to stem gentrification pressure. "Right-of-way gentrification: Conflict, commodification and

cosmopolitanism” (*Urban Studies*, 2016) maps the gentrification of public space onto side streets and back alleys. Writing my book, *Rights to Public Space: Law, Culture, and Gentrification in the American West*, allowed me to more fully develop the theoretical construct I introduced in earlier work.

A parallel arc of my work also emerges from property rights theory, nuisance law, and the regulation of public space. This research orbits the right to stable housing and to the idea of home. This project highlights how people who are homeless relate to, live with, invoke, subvert, and circumvent land use codes and police protocols. By exposing the rationale and impacts of Denver’s recent citywide camping ban, I explore social inequity in public space through a spatial ethnography with homeless citizens, city employees, and city council members. Here I focus on geographies of public space by engaging with human outcomes and the sociolegal architectures of neoliberal governmentality evident in quality of life laws aimed at encouraging investment by eliminating visible poverty and the facilitation of commerce through public/private partnerships. There are currently six papers emerging from this research. “Invisible Homelessness: Anonymity, exposure, and the right to city” (*Urban Geography* 2016), “After the ban: Moral economies of property” (*Antipode* 2016), “Dwelling without a home: Denver’s splintered public spaces” *Order and Conflict in Public Space* (2016), “Moving on, finding shelter: The spatiotemporal camp,” (*International Sociology* special issue 2017), “Never be stationary: Survival drug use in the neoliberal city (under review by *Social Science and Medicine*), and finally “Heroin and methamphetamine injection: An emerging drug use pattern” (under review by *American Journal of Urban Health*). At present I am pursuing funding for two components of this inquiry: tent city urbanism (housing the unhoused) and an emerging drug pattern (the increased use of methamphetamine by the unhoused).

My research is designed to help scholars and practitioners recognize and address social injustice by exposing planning and policy shortfalls, specifically the use and design of public spaces to displace marginal communities.